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ABSTRACT

The key element to the survival of speech communication and its status in academe is the basic course, which tells the academic community what speech communication is and what it can produce in terms of observable student behavior. This basic course, upon which many communication departments depend, must produce students who are obviously trained in the art of speech if the field is to continue to prosper. The basic speech course should have a personal performance emphasis formulated on a "performance triad" consisting of units in voice and diction, oral interpretation, and public speaking. Practical training in voice and diction, which students are unlikely to get elsewhere, recognizes the essential utility of good speech and promotes the awareness that how we speak and sound is vitally important to our personal, social, and professional success. Oral interpretation offers a training ground for the student to practice the skills learned in the voice and diction unit, and an introduction to the oral interpretation of literature. Emphasis in the public speaking unit of the course would also be on the act of performance. The performance triad approach would return the basic course to the oral dimension of communication, improving the field's professional reputation, its usefulness to education, and the education of students. (SR)

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THE BASIC COURSE IN COMMUNICATION: A PERFORMANCE TRIAD

V. A. SMITH

Our concern here with the content of the basic communication course is hardly frivolous. The trends in student population of the basic course may signal a cause for real alarm. Gibson, Hanna and Huddleston in their report in the October, 1985 issue of Communication Education report that twelve per cent of the colleges surveyed reported a decrease in enrollment and a figure double of that magnitude in overall department enrollment losses. Gibson also notes that almost a third of those departments surveyed depended to a large degree on the basic course. He adds that administrative support has eroded much more rapidly than enrollments.

Why does every college in every state served by the Southern States Communication Association not require a basic speech course for graduation? Think about your answer. What answers come to mind? What do your colleagues in business or chemistry say when explaining why they do not require speech. It is now not unusual for colleges of business to have their own communication courses in-house. What impact has this had on our profession and what does it tell us about how speech is regarded by other disciplines? Relevant to our convention theme of a "Return to Messages" let us ask ourselves what messages we as communication professionals are sending to our colleagues and those we serve.

The seemingly obvious answer is that speech communication

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proficiency is not thought to be a vital element in the personal and professional futures of our students. If that is the answer to the question and I submit that it is, then speech teachers have become prophets without honor in the age of communication.

Have we lost our missionary zeal since the turn of the century when the Department of Public Speaking was founded in 1911 at Louisiana State University? The key element to our survival and our status in academe is the basic course through which we tell the academic community who we are and what we can produce in terms of observable student behavior. The fact that many diverse factors are at play should not obscure the point that we as speech communication professionals must **produce an obviously improved product** that can be easily recognized as such by university faculty and students if we would continue and prosper.

This proposal to suggest a basic speech course that will produce an obviously improved product is based on a central premise: **we have lost our belief in the primacy of speech performance.** Let us define "performance" to mean that complex system of verbal and non-verbal components called speech communication. In the process of failing to use performance as a yardstick we have also failed to advocate the primacy of speech in daily life and as an instrument of success.

Our Association will serve as an obvious example. Our

professional interests have broadened so vastly in the past twenty years that we must face the specter of having no clear or definable commitment to the **spoken word**. This is not to demean those non-performance areas of communication but the current diversification of communication interests has blurred our professional persona both within and without our academic world.

Thus, having lost our interest in speech as performance we have become "studiers" of all sorts of communication rather than being the "doers" of speech performance. Our journals reflect interests in almost every conceivable specialty of the field. Who are the speech performance teachers of today? How many of our colleagues would prefer to be at the keyboard of the computer than teaching public speaking to a class of freshmen? Is the teaching of speech performance about to become a lost art? Consider the thought that our profession is apparently about to discard that which we must never lose if our discipline is to prosper. We must begin to spend less time in the basic course teaching theory, jargon, and psychology and more time producing young speakers who can organize ideas, think through an argument, and speak effectively and articulately. My thesis, stated simply, is this: **we must produce students who are quite obviously trained in the art of speech**. To do less is to do little at all.

The premise then leads to the proposal to formulate the basic course in speech on a "performance triad" consisting of units in voice and diction, oral interpretation, and public

speaking. Such an approach suggests a "fundamentals" concept that can be found in textbooks as recently as 1974. It is assumed that other specialized courses would be offered for speech majors and others as required but this course aims to replace the "blend" type first course which usually includes study in communication theory, interpersonal communication, small group communication, and public speaking. In selecting the areas of voice and diction, oral interpretation, and public speaking I suggest we focus the basic course back to a personal performance emphasis. From a marketing perspective the student becomes the "product" so that the proposal deals with improving our visible and audible product and thereby re-establishing our roles as teachers who make a difference to the student. Here are some reasons why the basic course should include a "performance triad."

Why should voice and diction be included in the basic course? The answer is again a question: Where else are students expected to get that information? Quite obviously our undergraduates have had little or no training in the basics of voice production, articulation or pronunciation. Nor is there any hope that they will receive that information in any other general-interest course. This is where speech teachers can make an impact; where we can offer specific practical training and above all an awareness that how we speak and sound is vitally important to our personal, social, and professional success.

In a review of a pronunciation guide by Charles Elster, Bruce Cook of the Los Angeles Times states that "as American English becomes more and more a spoken word rather than a written one, the emphasis falls more heavily on correct pronunciation." He adds, "If you want to play hardball in the fast lane today, then it is essential to know that in articulating 'irrevocable,' the accent falls in the second and not the antepenultimate syllable." He closes with the observation that "correct pronunciation is the key to success! Or at the very least it's a good way to avoid embarrassment at the next black tie affair you attend." This is where the performance triad concept will be most useful: the student's real world.

We often seem to forget that what we can do as speech teachers is unique: it is our "special thing." Students marvel at the discovery that there are regional dialects in our nation and that they make many simple and easily correctable errors in articulation and pronunciation. We as professionals may have forgotten the essential utility of good speech to the student. Students must realize that speaking with appropriate rate, volume and clarity is important in professional contexts. Whether in social conversation, public debate or a job interview, correct speaking skills are an obvious measure of the speaker's education and communication potential.

I hope that all here believe that an educated person (especially a speech-educated person) should sound educated. This

"sounding educated" involves a complex of skills that can be introduced in the voice and diction unit of the basic course and would include vocabulary, pronunciation, articulation, grammar, and appropriate language use. Again, these are not intellectual concerns but essential social and workplace skills. The teacher of the basic course must be one who has an interest in correct speech and language use and encourages others by example. Certainly those who aspire to teach should be made aware of the critical need for speech clarity in instructional settings. They, especially, must be made to realize that they are models of correct speech whether or not they choose to be. So are we all. So must we all practice what we would preach. As professionals we can not afford the luxury of being either poorly spoken or misusers of language if we are to expect the admiration of those with whom we live and work.

So as students improve their articulation and pronunciation skills they come to realize the instrumental nature of speech instruction: it changes the speaker in an obvious way and is self-evident in performance.

Perhaps the most unusual inclusion in the proposed "performance triad" is that of oral interpretation since it is one of our more esoteric areas of speech communication. It should be included because it offers a ready training ground for the student to practice the skills learned in the voice and diction unit and, of course, it offers students a much-needed

introduction to the oral interpretation of literature. This unit must stress the oral performance component far more than the analytical approach so loved by some. It is a sad but well-documented fact that our students are woefully ignorant of their culture as well as that of their history and geography. Certainly our colleagues in the English department cannot but applaud our efforts to help them awaken students to literature.

Possible areas within the oral interpretation unit would be to discuss the concept of literary merit as well as the study of how one determines meaning within the text. The role of the interpreter can easily be related to the chain of elements in a standard communication model, so the student might understand the various complexities between the idea of the sender and the spoken text.

The student would be given instruction in selecting worthwhile and challenging literature and in simple types of literary analysis but, as noted previously, the primary emphasis of the unit would be in the oral performance of the text. The blend of the esthetics of literature and performance along with the mastery of voice and diction would combine to produce a useful performance experience. Last ,but hardly insignificantly, some study of evaluation criteria for oral performance would have to be included.

The final unit in the performance triad approach to the basic course is ,of course, public speaking. Here again the

emphasis must be on the act of performance. There is no need to detail what would be taught in the unit as it is so common to us all. Each teacher and/or department implementing the performance triad approach would select what areas would be emphasized in the course.

The performance triad approach would return the basic course to the oral dimension of communication which I think is clearly in danger. I submit that our professional reputations, our usefulness to education, and the education of our students would be improved by adopting the performance triad.

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